

Living with Black Bears in Virginia (Video transcript)

[Music open]

[Bear cub "screetch."]

Man: Mr. Bear's been here three times in the past four days.

[Bear jump "bang" on cage.]

[Music close]

WSLS TV News Reporter: ...but why would a bear walk across a major highway?

WSLS TV News Reporter: She may only be 18 pounds, but with claws like that, she's no teddy bear.

Narrator: Black bears have been in the news and for good reason...their populations are on the rise. For the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries managing a growing bear population requires that we understand bears and understand how people relate to them. Wildlife biologists who work with bears say people often have misguided but very distinct beliefs about bears. Some fear them as ferocious man eaters while others believe bears to be completely harmless and try to get close to them or even feed them.

David Kocka, VDGIF Wildlife Biologist: *[bear cub noises]* I think one misconception about bears is people tend to equate black bears with Yogi Bear from the cartoon, you know, being slow and dumb. Black bears are none of those things, they are very intelligent, supposedly second only to primates in intelligence and they are very fast. A bear can out-run a race horse in a short distance, can reach speeds of 30 or 35 miles per hour, so...and they're very strong. You know, a 50 pound bear can hurt you if he wants to, as strong as they are, and as quick as they are. They generally, that's not their nature, they don't really want to have anything to do with people, but they like to get around our stuff and that's what causes problems or conflict for bears.

Narrator: In reality wild black bears are cautious, shy animals that have a deep distrust of humans. They want to avoid contact with us, but they are also curious animals, opportunists, who will not pass up an easy meal. Sometimes their hunger will drive them to risk travel into areas where humans live. They are tolerant animals that have the ability to adapt to a changing landscape here in Virginia. They're at home in the deep woods, but adaptable enough to live in a wide range of rural and increasingly suburban habitats. More bears are being sighted across the Commonwealth today more than any time in the last 100 years. While seeing more bears is a sign of a healthy population, there's always the potential for problems when bear and human populations collide.

Bruce Jones: Normally about the first week in May, uh, we have our friendly Mr. B., Mr. Bear, come to visit us so we normally try to get a few of the suet feeders out.

Narrator: Bruce Jones lives in Rappahannock County where bears have been making frequent visits.

Bruce Jones: Yes, I would say that, uh, we had no bear visits, uh, 'til about the last five years. Uh, we would have an occasion where they were stripping some of the autumn olive berries, and we would



have maybe one of the bluebird boxes get smashed when they were taking the eggs and the birds. So, they will bend these steel rods right in half to get the suet. And we, along with most other folks here in Rappahannock, have to put our feeders away. The hummingbird feeders, the regular feeders with, uh, black oil and especially suet, but we love 'em anyway.

Narrator: Bears in the suburban backyard might at first inspire anxiety or even fear; after all, they are powerful, quick running animals that could easily overtake us if they wanted to, but bear attacks on humans are extremely rare.

Dr. Michael Vaughan, Professor of Wildlife Sciences, Virginia Tech: One of the questions that's most frequently asked is, "Are bears dangerous?" Well, heck yes they're dangerous. Bears are big animals. They are powerful animals, and they can inflict injury on humans. The fact is they rarely do. Bears are also secretive animals, and they're shy animals and they tend to stay away from people.

Narrator: What should you do if you see a bear?

Jaime Sajecki, VDGIF Bear Project Leader: Well, if you were just in the woods and you happened upon a bear, just consider yourself lucky, and usually all you'll see is kind of its backside running away from you. If you're in your yard and you see a bear, uh, and it just kind of walking through, um, that's no reason to be alarmed. Uh, if you ever come up close to a bear and you're, uh, you turn a corner and, you know, there's a bear there and it didn't hear you coming, then the best thing to really do is just kind of walk away backwards, um, you know, quietly, don't run, and most times, once the bear kinda figures out what you are, there's, there would be no reason for it to come after you.

David Kocka, VDGIF Wildlife Biologist: You're safe. Your kids are safe. You...basically you need to make a presence out there. It's...there's a lot that people think about, um, in terms of you need to establish some dominance around the bears, in terms of they need to understand that you're a person and that you're more dominant than they are, the black bears. So, I try to stress that. I stress that, you know, kids in general make a lot of noise and so bears don't typically like to be around people that are making a bunch of noise. Uh, I stress that if they see a bear, make it a negative experience for 'em. You go outside, you let the bear see you, but then you can throw rocks at them, make loud noise, anything that in addition to them not finding a reward around the home is to stress the fact that they're not welcome there.

Narrator: A lot of misinformation and myths about bears has been passed down over the years.

David Kocka, VDGIF Wildlife Biologist: One of the most common myths about black bears is that females are very protective of their young. Um, this is not the case with black bears. It is the case with grizzlies or brown bears. They are very protective of their young. The black bears are not. Uh, typically what a black bear will do if she feels like her cubs are threatened she'll typically make a small noise and send those cubs up a tree and she can leave them there for upwards of about 24 hours until she feels comfortable again, and then she'll come back and make that same little noise and the cubs come down the tree and leave with her. I call it the Outdoor Life Myth, um, a bear is standing up on his hind legs, a black bear, and that means he's going to attack you. That's not what that means. Basically black bears have a tremendous sense of smell. They have very good sense of hearing. Their eyesight, there's some speculation, is not as good and so a lot of times if the wind is not right, if they're on all fours, there's something out there they can't determine what it is then they'll stand up on their hind legs to get a better, get better wind current, wind mixing, so they, they can determine what it is out there that they can't figure out initially.



Narrator: In North America, home to almost a million black bears, human populations and bear populations have co-existed for thousands of years. Virginia is home to only one species of bear, the black bear. Grizzly bears, also known as brown bears, are not found here. In the days before Virginia was colonized, black bears once roamed throughout Virginia from the mountains to the sea.

By 1900, due to unregulated hunting and habitat loss, bear numbers were reduced to small isolated populations. In the 1950's bears lived only in Virginia's western mountains and near the Great Dismal Swamp. Gradually, the population began to recover. Today, due in part to the efforts of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and because of regulated hunting, protected lands and the recovery of forested habitats, black bear populations are again thriving. And even though black bears are rarely seen by Virginia's residents, the fact is if you live in Virginia, you are in bear country. They now exist in 90 of the 99 counties in Virginia.

Bears can be active any time of day or night, but usually are most active at dawn and dusk and times when there is less outdoor human activity. Bears can see in color just about as well as people can. There's some evidence that they may be a bit near sighted, but this may actually help them find ants and grubs while foraging. Black bears have an excellent sense of smell which serves them well.

Bears in the western part of the state usually den in the hollows of trees while those in the eastern part of the state are more often found in ground dens. Ground dens can be located in thick patches of Mountain Laurel, dead falls or piles of sticks. Bears may spend anywhere between three to five months in dens. Amazingly during this time a bear will not eat, drink, defecate or urinate. Female bears, once they reach adulthood, can give birth every other year to one to four cubs. Cubs are born weighing around a half a pound and are blind and helpless, but they won't stay helpless for long.

David Kocka, VDGIF Wildlife Biologist: *[Bear cub screech]* At the footage of those other cubs were very docile a few weeks ago, but now at this age they are very much a handful. They're very strong. Their teeth are strong. They nip at ya. Basically they are not intended to be pets; they are wild animals.

Narrator: Their mother will care for cubs and den with them for one more year. The cubs will be a little over a year old and on their own once she's ready to breed again. During the early spring following emergence from winter dens, black bears need to find food. Green vegetation such as tender grass, roots or insects and grubs are some of their favorites. Because natural foods are limited at this time of year, bears will follow their stomachs to whatever they can find, such as road killed animals or carrion, bird food, pet and livestock food and our household garbage. Open garbage dumpsters are irresistible targets.

Also during the spring, yearlings are on their own for the first time having to find food and a territory. While young females generally establish a home range near that of their mother, young males will roam 100 miles or more to establish a new home range.

In summer, bears will find soft masts like blackberries, autumn olives, sassafras and cherry. Summer is the breeding season for bears; a time when they are naturally on the move. Adult males may roam well beyond their normal territory searching for mates. Except for the breeding season, bears generally live a solitary life.

In the fall, bears turn to vital high energy foods such as acorns, hickory nuts and beech nuts which will help them build up essential fat to survive in the winter dens. Cultivated corn, peaches, cherries, apples



and other fruits attract bears especially in years when natural food sources are scarce. Bears may gain as much as four to five pounds a day beginning in late summer through the fall in preparation for denning and the winter fast. They can spend 20 hours a day obtaining food to increase their fat content.

[Machine sound] With development occurring at a rapid pace, more and more people are moving into the forested lands and habitats used by wildlife. Even when the human population grows and expands into new areas, at the same time the bear population is also increasing. Sometimes in the spring and summer, when bears are on the move, one makes a wrong turn. This bear caused a sensation when it walked right through the doors of a hospital in Rocky Mount. Another bear stopped at a wooded median strip in the middle of a dangerous highway. Wildlife biologists used their tranquilizer dart to sedate the bear and relocate it to a safer location. If a bear shows up in a neighborhood, usually the best thing to do is simply to leave it alone. The bear will move on eventually.

Jan Almarode: This was the bear staring through the window and by the car.

Narrator: Jan Almarode had a bear in her Augusta County neighborhood that made several repeat visits to her home. She was able to photograph the bear through her living room window.

Jan Almarode: The bear could have cared less about the horses. The horses could have cared less about him. He hung out under here. He'd knock the feeders down. If there was anything in them he just, you know, got into it and even when they were empty he liked knocking them down and around. We just, you know, brought the trash in, um, quit puttin' out the bird seed. We have one cat outside that mom would feed him much earlier and bring any leftovers in. Yeah, we haven't seen him in an age now.

Narrator: Removing the food source is usually all that's needed to solve bear problems. Once a bear begins to associate humans with food, its chances for survival diminish greatly. People may think they're doing the bear a favor by feeding it, but in most cases feeding results in a death sentence for the bear. Once a bear becomes accustomed to getting human food, it may become aggressive or be perceived as a threat to human safety. Some of these bears will need to be destroyed. Feeding bears is against the law in Virginia.

Fred Frenzel, VDGIF Wildlife Biologist: It all goes back to food. It's always the same. It's the food source of some sort that always attracts the bear to the houses. The big three things are bird food, pet food and trash cans. Sometimes barbeque grills, sometimes compost piles, but the majority of calls and complaints I get are dealing with bird food, pet food and trash cans, and they simply need to remove the food source and the bears 95% of the time disappear.

Narrator: Massanutten is a mountain resort in the heart of bear country.

David Rodocker, Massanutten Resort: Roughly, Massanutten Resort is one of the largest resorts here on the East Coast. It has roughly eighteen hundred timeshare units, um, which in turn constitutes about roughly a hundred and eighty containers. So, as the resort grows our containers grow and the responsibility to keep people safe grows as well.

Narrator: The resort had numerous bear encounters, mostly bears attracted to the smell of garbage from open dumpsters. After consulting with wildlife biologists from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, a solution was found. A new bear-proof dumpster.



David Rodocker, Massanutten Resort: Well, this particular type has an inset lid and by removing the latch, you're able to access the smaller lid and go ahead and put in your refuse, re-latch it, therefore creating a very substantially bear-proof container.

Narrator: At Sherando Lake Campground the U.S. Forest Service also has bears looking for an easy meal.

Kaitlin McFadden, Forestry Technician, U.S. Forest Service: I was working my first evening shift here at Sherando and we were taking trash out of the lakeside area and I heard this big noise over here in the picnic area and lo and behold there was a black bear on top of the trash cans, opening and closing the lids looking for trash.

Narrator: The Forest Service is taking steps to no longer lure bears into the campground by doing away with its old garbage cans.

Sandy Fix, Forestry Technician, U.S. Forest Service: We've replaced the ones in the picnic area, um, because they get the most use and that's an area the bears can come down out of the woods and get to trash cans real easily. So we replaced those, and now we're in the process of replacing the ones on the beach and, um, we've replaced all the dumpsters. Uh, we ask the campers to take their trash to the localized dumpsters at each camping loop and, um, that, too, has helped.

Kaitlin McFadden, Forestry Technician, U.S. Forest Service: Yes, we do still have bears here. We are living in bear country, of course, but with the new trash cans it makes it a lot less easier for them to get into the trash. They actually have a latch on the inside of the trash can that has to be pulled in order for the top to open.

Narrator: Bears may also cause agricultural damage to apple orchards and to farmers' crops. Beehives are also a favorite treat. Deterring bears with electric fences to give them a jolt may help in these cases.

Albert B. Morris, Beekeeper: I put it up about seven years ago, well, a bear tried to get to in there two different times and this is a regular bear crossing through here. And uh, he wasn't successful, he tore a couple strands loose I guess when it hit him.

Narrator: Regulated hunting in areas with a high bear density also keeps bear numbers in check.

Bob Duncan, VDGIF Wildlife Division Director: Well, I think black bears are one of the most cherished species in Virginia, uh, whether people hunt or don't hunt, uh, there's a wide base of interest and support for black bears all across the state, and, of course, in that group of black bear enthusiasts, I would rate hunters right at the top of the bunch because they've been supporting black bear management, uh, for years and years. They've supported the department's efforts in black bear research and black bear management, all which is aimed at, uh, perpetuating the black bear population in a healthy condition for all future generations.

Narrator: Managing Virginia's healthy bear population is a balancing act that recognizes the value and the importance of Virginia's largest animal. The great conservationist Aldo Leopold once said that managing wildlife was easy. The real trick is managing people.

Dr. Michael Vaughan, Professor of Wildlife Science, Virginia Tech: There, there are two things you look at in, in, uh, population levels of bears. One is biological carrying capacity. How many bears can live out



there in the wild? How, how much food is out there to support how big a population? That's biological carrying capacity. There's this other term, it's called cultural carrying capacity. That, that is how many bears are people willing to accept, uh, living near them, and there are probably two different levels. Uh, biological carrying capacity is likely higher than the cultural carrying capacity.

Jan Almarode: It's awesome having the wildlife around here. We've got deer all over the place. We've got turkeys, the bear that pass through. I love it, and when you live out in the woods and live with the country, you just have to adjust to what's out there and we adjusted our schedules. I would feed a little later in the mornings where there's a little more light *[laugh]*, and, um, you know, we re-adjusted bird feeders and everything and we didn't have any problems.

Dave Steffen, VDGIF Forest Wildlife Program Manager: Today, we have healthy bear populations throughout most of Virginia and similar to colonial times we have the unique privilege to share the landscape with black bears like, uh, we once did, but with that privilege comes the responsibility to keep bears wild.

[Music]

End.

